

# ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS AS POST-MODERNIST FEMINIST PROJECTIONS

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## Abstract

For centuries, women in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men. In patriarchal Bourgeois society, the matriarchal community has been 'humiliated', 'afflicted', 'silenced' and 'tortured' socially and economically. With the post-modernizing age, women began to see the universe with their own eyes and not through the male gaze. In India, with the matriarchal struggle against patriarchy another inner revolution started manifesting itself in literature, especially women's writings. The voices of women began to vie with those of men. The purpose of our paper is to focus on the feminist message as articulated in Anita Desai's well reputed novels, *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Our intent is to examine critically how in the post- modern era Indian women writers in English have highlighted women's questions. They have raised a fiery voice or initiated an inner revolution against the traditional customs and gender discrimination with a view to equalizing human rights. Considering the femme fatale characters of Anita Desai, one of the most renowned Indian writers writing in English, especially the powerful and domineering female protagonists, Sita and Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* This paper proposes to

draw attention to Desai's works as exemplary instances of postmodern feminism.

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**Keywords:** Sita, Maya, Indian Feminism, Anita Desai

## **Introduction**

Anita Desai has treated psychological realities very minutely in her novels. Her purpose of writing is to discover herself and then aesthetically, convey the truth. She has tried to probe into the depths of a woman's psyche and showing its relation to society. And, this concern can be drawn through the portrayal of the neurotic like Maya and Sita. Both these women present sensitive individuals in their moments of intense struggle and their efforts to seek neurotic solutions. Anita Desai is widely recognized as the pioneer of psychological novel in modern Indian English literature. The prominent feature of her works is her art of the portrayal of characters. She examines the psychological inner workings of women and presents their reactions. Her two novels *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* present the traumatic experiences and mental tensions that Maya and Sita undergo. Desai explores the emotional world of neurotic Maya, who is haunted by a premonition of her husband's death on account of her belief in astrological prediction; while in *Sita*, Desai highlights the theme of repressed childhood neurosis. The repressed impulse and memories lie buried in the unconscious of the protagonist Sita but return later in a form of a full-blown neurotic picture during her fifth pregnancy. The theme of both novels is disharmony and discord confined to the family and at times to the mal-adjusted or ill-adjusted self. Loneliness and unrequited love drives Maya to the jaws of death and violence, while Sita suffers from "Oedipus complex". Both Maya and Sita are representatives of Postmodern Indian Feminism. They both represent the Indian personality structure which is very complex and multilayered.

During psychoanalytical study, we may realize Maya and Sita likely to be the representatives of repressed female community. Maya's unexpected to deal with neurosis goes for violence while Sita's compromising and adjusting with it returns home peacefully.

## **Anita Desai's Treatment of Feminism**

Anita Desai, undoubtedly, occupies a supreme position of the contemporary Indian Feminist novelist. With her poignant, hypersensitive knowledge, erudition and inner psychological power concerning the natural and real everyday affairs of familial, societal, economic dealings as minutely impacted in her major novels. Her novels symbolize the universal feminism. Through her novels, Desai has unveiled the grim as well as mysterious truth

of human psychology, especially women's questions in most of her novels of our postmodern era. As a self-conscious social critic and reformer, Desai has divulged the unnoticed images of the inferior and hatred feminine community of her age. Feminism is one of the top most issues of her fictional world; she has pictured a paradigm of the whole women community with a view to spreading the message of the second sex. She has dealt her fiction with feminine sensationalism and vivid themes which are innovative and potential concerning the miserable, drudgery plight of the weaker working class of women's untold affliction, agony, and psychological, conflicting senses under the unconscious and unwise, inconsiderate husbands, fathers, and brothers. Desai has wanted to highlight the matriarchal struggle, self-freedom, and self-identity and self-power against the male dominated world, where she has universalized the feminist message with the inner gaze. Though Desai attempts to analyze women's sensationalism and vivid expressionism in the field of fictional world, however, she has no willingness to sense herself as self-conscious feminist writer.

Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, focuses on the minute and subtle images of a tormented, tortured, toiled, trodden and self-frustrated feminism preoccupied with her inner heart, soul and mind, her sulking depression, melancholy, pessimism, self-storming pragmatics surrounding the atmosphere of mankind. The existential predicament of female world contradicts the masculinity. Though her female protagonists or femme fatale figures, Desai makes a fervent appeal and plea for a radiant dawn for the whole female community. The novelist discusses the vivid and clear cut problematic features of temperamental incompatibility, conjugal chaotic and conflicting dilemmas and ever growing hatred and despised disparity between male and female. In her novels, most protagonists cum heroines are segmented and alienated from the world, society, family, parents, and even from their own selves, because they are not average people but individuals who hardly enable to cope with the patriarchy, unable to keep abreast with this setup, rather they drift into their own sequestered world where they spin their great expectations, ambitions, dreams, which automatically disappears in the realm of oblivion.

Her art of feminine characterizations are superb but who are haunted by a peculiar acute concept and judgments of doom, withdraw themselves into an imaginative world of their own, get hysterical, neurotic, self-agitated and unhappy mood changed. A prick into the mystical crusts of the psychology of the female protagonists of Anita Desai upholds the universal emptiness, conventional alienation and solitude and an abysmal segregation from which they are victim of mental agony and pang of tormenting psychology. Her feminist superb creations are adamant and eccentric towards

the male dominated order and system. They silently rebel and take recourse to naturalism and realism socially and economically—a world of their own, a world where they can be able to confirm their determination, affirmation and freewill. Femininity and womanhood are not bounded by social contracts. Her tale and novel are presented through the feminine sensibility and pragmatic sense. Desai aims to examine the natural, social and fanciful bonds that unchain the women's issues and in this way she is concerned with the destiny of the house minded woman in the typical Indian society of the postmodern period. The theme of the martial unhappiness and sorrowful heart and an unadjusted marriage-bond cause depression and alienation in the mind of women as impacted in her popular novels.

Anita Desai is considered as an inner psychological novelist as her prime concern is mingled with the nocturnal and nebulous atmosphere of the women's psyche. The motivations, the conscience and the psychic excitement and turbulent agitation of the storming psychology of the female community of their surroundings are dealt with the cardinal and exclusive incidences of Desai's oeuvre. A particular trace and trait in the women's characterization, a tragic downfall turns into a psychic malady making their mentality over neurotic and hysterical as Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock who suffers from the father-fixation. Desai's fictions are auto-biographical, in the sense they impact her silent temperament. Anita Desai pictures the glaring portrayal of the women's quests by fostering out the profound and deeper universe of her powerful protagonists. Anita Desai is magnified with the comprehensibility and intelligibility which brightens her aestheticism through her novel-worlds. Desai's characters belong to the affluent sections or Indian society they hardly realistically and comprehensively have to tackle the pragmatism of struggle of life for survival and existence. Desai writes regarding the classified characters because she senses them with an acute knowledge and sagacity.

Anita Desai, through the perfect symbolic delineation both in the art of characterization and occurrences and happenings, through milieu and natural surroundings and insignia, has excellently and artistically interwoven the fictional world into a symmetrical and similar blending of the societal bonds.

The artistic area in her novels she has pictured to postmodernist readers as a "readerly text" to exploit is wholly appreciated and praiseworthy. Undoubtedly, the readers wonder at the authorial skillful portraiture of feminism or women's questions. Anita Desai has treated realities very subtly and adroitly in most of her novels. The main motto of the postmodern novelist is to find out her true identity, existence and independence and then, aesthetically convey the deeper meaning of truth and beauty. Anita Desai has rendered a new dimension to Anglian fiction by

handling the pitiable and awful predicament of the rifted self, especially of housewives facing singly handed by the torments and fortunes of their insensitive and temperamentally callous husbands. Desai presents a kaleidoscopic image of the profound minds of her women's personality. Existential predicament of her protagonist by various factors is her main issue in her novel. Desai makes known to us the unconscious motivations of human psyche, problem of human relationship, the protagonist's quest for identification in all her novels. Women, in Desai's fiction embody the author's quest for the psychological insight, awareness and harmony. They are the focal point of contact between the writer's consciousness and the world from which women are deviated. Her women, therefore, have to face the conflicts make effort to break away, to assert their individuality and think whether their decision to do so is the right one, how to resolve the identity crisis and emerge various from the trauma.

Mrs. Anita Desai sincerely broods over the fate and future of the postmodern women particularly in the male chauvinistic society and her annihilations at the marriage-bond.

Desai's female protagonists are, generally, caught in a web of painful circumstances, their struggle and the outcome of which is usually the basis of the novel. The problem invariably in each case, is the difficulty of adjustment in conjugal relationship, of building bridges, of bringing together or harmonizing and taking a holistic view of one's circumstances. The major concerns of Anita Desai are hatred love and affection, depression and solitude. For long centuries, women communities in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men.

In the male dominated Bourgeois society, the matriarchal community has been "humiliated", "afflicted", "silenced" and "tortured" socially and economically, truly speaking, in all spheres of their lives. With the post-modernizing age, women began to see the universe with their own eyes and not through the male gaze. In India, with the matriarchal struggle against patriarchy another inner revolution started manifesting itself in literature, especially women's writings. The voices of women began to vie with those of men. The purpose of our paper is to focus on the feminist echoes as articulated in Anita Desai's famous novels, *Cry*, *the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Our intent is to examine critically how in the post-modern era Indian women writers in English have highlighted women's questions, demanding the rights, suffragettes. They have raised a fiery voice and initiated an inner revolution against the traditional order, system and gender discrimination with a view to achieving human rights. Considering the femme fatale characters of Anita Desai, one of the most renowned Indian writers writing in English, especially the powerful and domineering female protagonists of *Cry*, *the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

This paper proposes to draw attention to Desai's works as exemplary instances of post-modern feminism.

### **'Maya' as the Representative of Post-modern Feminism**

In the first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai has tried to unveil the inner truth of the post-modern age through the female protagonist cum heroine, Maya with a view to awakening the neglected, tormented, inferior women of the Indian Bourgeois society. In the male dominated society, Maya hardly enables to get adjusted with her family, her husband, Gautama, misogynistic lawyer who is much older than she. Through Maya, Desai wants to expose the psychological conflicts and agonies, alienations and abnormal treatment and mannerism of the protagonist along with the dreadful fright, culminating lunatic traits and the suicidal act. Through her novel, Desai focuses on the fears, sufferings, solitude, inner melancholic mode, suppressed optimism of the Post-modern feminism of India. It is observed that the cardinal reasons of marital discord and loneliness of Indian women in age-difference, difference in maturation, Indian philosophy of segregations and mental relationship between husband and wife. The very mindset of Indian female community that they are supposed to be weak, other, inferior, and docile and so on adds to their vacuity.

Maya shares a deep affectionate relationship with her father and is pained to leave the parental home at marriage. Her unnoticed mental agonies and afflictions upbringing caused by her mother's death makes her alienated from outer world. The ambitions and expectations she had at married life are not fulfilled and as a result, she becomes fragmented, fuzzy and upset mentally. Thus Maya is highlighted as an extremely hypersensitive figure; Desai represents a hysterical and neurotic woman who fails to cope with the patriarchal order and system where she revolts silently and helplessly like an inferior being. It seems to us that Maya fails to accept natural truth and realistic issues in the cocoon. She adopts an escapist path and becomes a "nature child" wherein she tries to find out condolence in the realistic environment and landscapes. She wants to get rid of her nothingness through getting mixed with birds, animals, and a space that humans fail to compensate in Maya's storming life. Maya may be regarded as a different being from traditional and conventional norms and principles. Actually, she never supports the idealistic sense of an ideal wife in a middle class family of Gautama. Her economic reliance upon her husband makes her feel insecurity, helpless and powerless because she regards herself as the ruled to the ruler's gaze. The novelist wants to focus on Maya as a post-modernist female with a view to unchaining the iron of gate of her solitary life; Maya wants to search out a purified world where she will get equity without having any difference between male and female.

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* deals with the marital discord between Gautama and Maya. The novel is based on the metaphysical prayers of a pitiable woman who lacks in romantic feelings and emotions. She identifies herself with the peacock in the conflicts of the excessive joy and ecstasy of their dreadful inner experiences of love and affection. We are told of her cruel past and her contradiction with the astrologer Albino who had once predicted to her that either she or her husband would die prematurely within the four years of their conjugal life. The anxiety caused by this prediction had diminished with the passage of time but with the demise of their pet dog Totto. All these unexpected incidences and unpleasant memories haunt her frequently. The cruelty of the past of her childhood, the constant fear of demise, her expectation to exist, her regression, all these are closely related with her recollection of the oracles of Albino astrologer.

The tale of Maya's existence seems to be one of the three-fold patterns of facts that may be concluded as: deprivation, alienation and elimination gradually. Firstly, Maya is deprived of brotherly as well as parental care and affection. Secondly, she is alienated from her father figure husband and at last, she brings about the elimination from life and her own self from familial responsibility and duty. Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* portrays the drudgery life of her female protagonist-Maya who seems to suffer since she is married to the male, who fails to realize the fractured identities. Regarding the psychological agonies of Maya, Dr. Sanjay Kumar's comment may be accepted in this regard:

Maya's fear is aggravated as she fails to relate to Gautama her husband. Between the husband and wife; there exists a terrible communication gap as both of them seem to live in different worlds.

(Kumar 2000: p.22)

Maya is an inactive woman of passions and emotions on the other hand, Gautama as a psychological intellectual. One of the crucial remarks in the novel is the problem of her existence in her case. She longs to realize where she stands in alienation of time, the impossible vastness of space. Her desperate struggle to have a self-existence of her own being threatened by the presence of her husband. Consequently, she imagines him as an antagonist and her psychic problem becomes an existential one.

Maya's disappointment at Gautama's lack of sympathy and understanding is hardly realized. She never confides in her anxieties, but her husband tries to help her to tackle the situations. He fails to pacify her because she does not alter. The novel, *Cry, the Peacock* exposes an impression of marital incongruity and unhappy conjugal life. According to Suresh Kohli:

No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is.

(Suresh 1970: p.34)

For a woman, the traditional stereotype is one that cares and gives to others, even to the point of neglecting herself. The feminist inspiration has produced women characters that do not lose their identity, but assert the necessity for an independent identity. In the feminist fiction, we find women who are highlighted to be making efforts to mould their lives to be themselves, even to the point of disrupting their convention, bond relationship in a traditional society. But in portraying Maya as a character born of feminist inspiration, Desai is apparently ambiguous of her own because Maya fails both in creating an identity for herself and in leading a stable life. The psychological problem and the agony of Maya's life are accurately impacted in the significant fable of the peacock's mating ritual. The cry of the peacock is the cry of the natural instinct of a woman, who is not mentally satisfied. Maya realizes that she wants Gautama's physical presence, his love and a normal life. She is capable of empathy which enables her to experience what the peacock and peahen are experiencing but this makes her feel all the more intensely that although there is an emotional arousal, there is no physical satisfaction which is the chief reason of her agony against Gautama. A sense of lack of fulfillment leads Maya's psychology to brooding and regression. Being an introvert, Maya does not like socializing, nor she is able to face realism, and remains at home brooding.

In the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai has given the feminist message of the post-modernist female generation through creating the protagonist cum heroine Maya. Through a small world of wife and husband, Desai has drawn a universal feminism where she also has pictured a basic difference between the patriarchy and matriarchy. But in the post-modern period, we may find the situation little better. In fact, the Indian authors have tried to truncate the ever growing feminist questions through the form of literature. We seem that Desai has tried to equalize the difference between male and female through her characters. According to many critics of Desai, Maya is the embodiment of the Post-modernist feminism of the Indian Bourgeois community, culture and society.

### **'Sita' as the Embodiment of Indian Feminism**

The aim of this paper is to highlight the feminist message through the protagonist, Sita in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). Anita Desai's chief concern is human relationship and she explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. The protagonist, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged



woman who finds herself isolated from her husband and children because of her emotional reactions to many things that happen to her. She takes a holy pilgrimage to Manori, an island for spiritual purification. She also redefines her relationship with her childhood soil, Manori where she understands her husband, children and city life. There is also a change in Sita's identity and she is redefining her relationship with her husband. She accepts to go with her husband. Her return to the mainland with her husband is the result of her realization and her sense of alienation is rootless. Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* deals with the inner world of the protagonist, Sita. She is physically unimpressive and over-sensitive. Her over-sensitiveness does not allow her to mingle with an ordinary life. It compels her to go away from this burdensome and crowded area. Sita decides to flee to Manori where there is no crowd except landscapes. Her over-sensitiveness does not allow her to give birth to her fifth child. But her stay at Manori helps to understand that she can not live forever on a make believe stage and that she has to accept her existence as a whole. Sita deals with the past and holds the key to the present behavior in this novel. Sita's predicament may be compared with Maya. She is psychologically obsessed with her loveless marriage with Raman. Here marital relation as well as abnormal man-woman relationship has been portrayed with a remarkable poignancy.

Sita is a married woman and has four children, but in the picture of misery and dejection. She feels herself to be an encaged bird in a house which offers her nothing but a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment. Her unhappiness in married life finds expression in emotion of contempt for the friends and colleagues of her husband. Her cruel childhood, stricken with deprivation doubt and despair, has had a negative impact upon her psychology. She feels enslaved within these doubts and struggles to free herself. A series of situations and incidents project the seething tension, the compulsion and withdrawal of Sita's festered soul. The doubts, the waiting, the unsolved questions that seethe within her and prey upon her mind, turn her into a hypersensitive and depressed individual, with a certain element of mental derangement. She turns into a paranoid character, a cripple without crutches, like a flying creature that startles at the slightest sound. Sita reacts abnormally and suffers from psychological hesitation. What would hardly be noticed by another person becomes to her an act of persecution. She develops a haunting fear that there is a contradiction around her. There is a clash between the conscious individual and the insular, complacent world around her. Sita's smoking is a trace of silent rebellion, of self assertion, an effort to be herself and to show the world, which has an identity of her own, whereas in reality she is actually crumbling down. Her untidy before her husband is the outcome of an underlying desire to prove that she does not care for anybody in a world that has not cared for her. Her

abhorrence against the patriarchy, her boredom is only camouflages to conceal her failing strength from the world. Gradually, all the problems and complexities of her heart magnify in dimension. Like other protagonists cum heroines of Anita Desai, Sita repels from everyone, but she remains like an encaged bird.

She can never attain peace and solace whether she is in Bombay or in Manori. Her condition reminds one of a person in pair who shifts from one posture to another with a vain expectation of removing untold sufferings and conflicting senses.

Sita senses that if reality can not be controlled then fancy would be the only alternative. She therefore, decides to live under an imagination and finds the island to be as a gypsy, a protection. It had provided her the first beams of happiness after a grim past. Now, with the passage of time she can imagine only the radiant prospects of the island which spells to her. The search for identity leads to the great protection to Manori Island – an escape of a sensitive individual, so sensitive as to be made by her own husband. Sita believes that her decisions to say 'No' to society, to break its norms and not give birth to the baby are correct. Her rejection of her in-law and her alienation from social dictum are only camouflages, the way a tiny creature might adopt certain features, not of its own breed, to conceal her insecurity, restlessness her search for her true identity and her own unsucceeding inner strength from the abode. She has the conviction that she would ensure her expectations in loneliness.

Sita's over riding concern in unwanting to give birth to her fifth child is a kind of regression that she wishes to be reborn as a child. For, she had to assume the role of an adult before she could fully lead the life of an infant. No wonder she is obsessed with keeping her fifth child rather than let it go or grow because to her, keeping the child meant retaining her childhood in a carefree island. Sita soon finds that reality is no more troublesome than imagination. Happiness at Manori proves to be a mirage for the grim realities of life are present on this island just as in Bombay. Sita gets puzzled fancifully with Manori and has to face reality.

Her stay at Manori has refreshed her pressed psychology and she can now look at the world realistically. Unlike Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita's relationship with her husband is not abnormal. There is, no doubt, a temporary solitude at the time Sita comes to Manori, but absence makes her heart grow fonder and she realizes that this attitude towards life is more rational than her inner self. His courage in facing the complexities and realities of life has a greater meaning. She had merely been a coward and had all along felt obsessed while confronting the "ugliness of a meaningless life." Sita felt to make a compromise to live with her husband and travel alone mentally and emotionally. But later on, it became improbable for her to make

any compromise. Hence, she escaped the land of necromancy but there she found that time had made it damage there also on the place and its dwellers.

The intensive realization brings her back to painful reality, forcing her to retrace her steps back towards the safety and slavish security of her house in Bombay, to wait for the birth of her child. She takes sagacious attempts than Maya and pacifies herself and she acts before annihilation can occur. Sita's final moment of realization comes, ironically not when her husband is patient with her on trying to reason with her but at a time when he has deserted her. Now she feels "released" and tension-free. The tensions and emotion within her psychology are not quite independent of her husband's, that life with him is real and the future is more precious than the past. And, with this realization the truth dawns upon her that her behavior had not been completely unnatural because the heifer, the grain, the slum barons all hopes to hide and resort to alienation before giving birth. In each case, the solitary experiences precede that of creation. She returns to Manori in order to give her fifth baby for a normal birth.

Till now, there had been complexities in her thought. She was like a restless spirit unable to attain solace. With the realization that true courage is in facing the complexities, the realities of life, and that fleeing away is merely an act of cowardice she comes to peace with her self. Her fleeing away from her home and urban milieu has brought about a damaging effect. None of her doubts and problems has been resolved. In fact, she has become winner in alienating herself further from her husband and children. The one and most important aspect where she has emerged triumphant in her escaping to Manori is her sanity and normality. She realizes that real courage is what her husband exposes, it means standing up and trying to tackle the circumstances and coming to terms with them quietly, boldly and creatively. In alienation, she has discovered that her true identity can be forged only in relationship. If she has to live on earth, she can do so merely either by adapting to her circumstances or by copying with others to whom she has to deal in the course of life.

With Sita, this realization and subsequent reconciliation is more important than the previous conflict that had haunted her mind. In this kind of realization, one can discern as advancement in Desai's vision of a woman's struggle to find her existence. One may not unreasonably propose that the name of the heroine recalls not only the name of her nobler namesake in the Ramayana, but also her undoubted faith that her real identity was firmly linked with that of her husband, Ramayana. In this novel, it becomes clear that Desai has fostered out the radical change in place of conservative. Though the heroines of Anita Desai often act violently but in this novel there is a positive change. Sita reconciles herself to her fate. She strikes a perfect balance between her inner self and the outer world. Unlike Maya, her

alienation is not temperamental or environmental. Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* depicts the real portraiture of an Indian woman who rebels against the convention and old mode of life, in the life of western freedom. In transforming her experience in the form of art, Desai uses visual details and an impressionistic style in an attempt to convey a sense of underlying meaning everyday affairs, manner and treatment.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we may say that the theme of both the novels is disharmony and discord confined to the patriarchal structure and at times to the mal-adjusted or ill adjusted self. Alienation and unrequited love drives Maya to the jaws of death and violence, while Sita suffers from "Oedipus complex". According to many critics and Desai Scholars, both Maya and Sita are representatives of Post-modern Indian Feminism as impacted on *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* They both represent the Indian personality structure which is very complex and multilayered. During psychoanalytical study, we may find Maya and Sita likely to be the representatives of repressed female community. Maya's unexpecting to deal with neurosis goes for violence while Sita's compromising and adjusting with it returns home peacefully.

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